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ABSTRACT

Eight coaches of oral interpretation from colleges across the United States were asked to tape record the coaching sessions that brought eight novices to tournament readiness. All of the students used the same three-poem program on the general theme of animals and children, but each student was required to write the introduction and transitions. After the tapescripts had been prepared, the verbal interactions were analyzed to identify the oral interpretation topics covered in each session as well as the specified patterns in using types of verbal interactions and in presenting the topics. The 68 oral interpretation topics were grouped into five focuses: literary analysis, delivery, audience, manuscript, and forensics. The analysis revealed that the eight dyads touched on all but four of the 68 topics. Those omitted were repetition, muscle tone/tension, audience context, and functioning of tournaments. Not only did the dyads treat most of the oral interpretation topics, but they gave supremacy to literary analysis, reaffirming the prevailing notion among oral interpretation scholars that literary analysis is vital to unlocking the meaning of a selection and that delivery grows from this study. (HOD)

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TOPICAL CONCERNS IN THE POETRY COACHING DYAD

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TOPICAL CONCERNS IN THE POETRY COACHING DYAD

Carolyn Keefe

Criticism of Forensic Oral Interpretation

Oral interpretation specialists, particularly those outside the forensic community, seem to believe that forensic oral interpretation is beset with serious problems.¹ Task Force III of the Pre-SCA 1983 Convention Conference on "Interpretation: Issues for the '80s" identified these problems as: 1) the failure of contests to bring together satisfactorily the text and the performer, 2) the inadequacy of contest rules to reflect contemporary interpretation theory, 3) forensic instructors' lack of interpretation knowledge, 4) the failure of judges to consider the literature, 5) judging incompetence, 6) the inferiority of contests as compared to festivals, 7) emphasis on winning as an end in itself, and 8) the influence of forensics in the depreciation of academic respect for oral interpretation.²

The only evidence to support these charges is the personal opinion of the task force members and a few recollected quotations from forensic coaches. In the task force worksheet exchange, the innuendos against forensics and its practitioners are frequent. One participant, in commenting on delivery techniques, claims, "It [the perceived focus on delivery] smacks dangerously to me of the old mechanical school of elocution.

It's simply dressed up in modern language."³ Another person calls forensics a "wasteland."⁴

Merely pointing out that the person who attacks the status quo has a responsibility to present a well-supported case is weak refutation against the detractors of forensics. But currently the forensic community has no strong argumentative recourse and must fall back on such an injunction and in trading opinion for opinion, example for example. Forensic oral interpretation lacks the descriptive research that could ascertain its status and the empirical research that could determine its effects. Without these studies, forensic educators do not know if defense of the status quo, minor repairs, or rigorous reform should be the response to criticism.

If the forensic community follows its teaching that contentions should be supported by sufficient, recent, varied, and trustworthy evidence, then it will realize that its immediate task is to develop hypotheses and conduct useful research on its own activities. Every area of forensic oral interpretation has been neglected.⁵ Thus many starting points are needed in order to build theory and establish connections between the various components of interpretation.

A Study of Forensic Coaching

Procedure

In a recent doctoral study,⁶ the present author focused upon the coaching of oral interpretation of poetry. Eight coaches from across the country⁷ (four senior coaches and four graduate student coaches⁸), who were associated with "consistent"

forensic programs,⁹ tape recorded their coaching sessions that brought eight novices¹⁰ to tournament-readiness.¹¹ All the students used the same three-poem poetry program on the general theme of animals and children, but each student was required to write the introduction and transitions. After tapescripts had been prepared, the researcher analyzed the verbal interactions, identified the oral interpretation topics covered¹² in each session, and specified patterns in using types of verbal interactions and in presenting the topics.

It is only with the matter of oral interpretation topics that the author is concerned in this paper. If it can be shown that the eight coaching dyads dealt with the topics widely recognized as important in analyzing literature and preparing for delivery, then the charges that forensics does not bring together satisfactorily the text and the performer and that forensic instructors lack interpretation knowledge will be proven false for at least the persons involved in this study.

Finding out the topical content of the coaching sessions took several steps. On the basis that multiple edition oral interpretation textbook authors could be rightly considered experts in the field, the researcher first made an inductive study of three textbooks: Bacon's The Art of Interpretation, Bowen, Aggertt, and Rickert's Communicative Reading, and Lee and Gura's Oral Interpretation.¹³ Her purpose was to identify the topics that these authors treat in reference to poetry. Inasmuch as coaches also need to discuss with novices the various aspects of tournament competition, the researcher also included

forensic topics drawn from her eighteen-year experience in coaching and from two forensic textbooks.¹⁴ The sixty-eight topics that emerged were then grouped into five foci: 1) Focus on Literary Analysis, 2) Focus on Delivery, 3) Focus on Audience, 4) Focus on Manuscript, and 5) Focus on Forensics. Next the tapescripts were examined to determine which of these topics were covered by each dyad. In order to ascertain if there was a pattern to this coverage, note was made of the particular session(s) in which the topic occurred. The last step was to categorize the topics according to the number of coaching sessions--the coaches held a total of thirty-five--in which a given topic appeared. With a range of coverage running from one session to twenty-seven, these designations were made: primary topics, nineteen to twenty-seven sessions; secondary topics, ten to eighteen sessions; and tertiary topics, one to nine sessions.

Results of the Study

Because of time limitations, the researcher is not able to discuss the patterns of coverage but will concentrate on the topics themselves. They will be presented under omitted, covered, and stressed topics.

Omitted Topics

The eight dyads touched on all but four of the sixty-eight topics. Those omitted were repetition, muscle tone/tension, audience context, and functioning of tournaments.

Covered Topics

The topics varied widely in the number of sessions in which they were found. The list below shows the primary, secondary,

and tertiary classification with the topics arranged according to descending numbers of sessions.

Primary topics: mood/feeling, 27; persona, 25; time/rate/ pausing, 24; theme, 22; point of view/attitude(s)/message/truth, 22; figures of speech/images/sensory appeals/visualization, 20; storyline/plot, 19; intensity/force/stress, 19; and introduction/transitions, 19.

Secondary topics: pronunciation/reader's dialect, 17; facial expression, 17; listener understanding, 15; time elements, 14; pitch/inflection, 14; allusion, 13; contrast, 13; order of selections, 13; setting/scene, 11; meaning of words, 11; characterization (vocal), 11; time limit/timing of program, 11; volume, 10; eye contact, 10; and character focus/placement, 10.

Tertiary topics: articulation, 9; audience's response/empathy/feedback, 9; binder/manuscript specifications or description, 9; breath control, 8; gesture, 8; handling of manuscript/binder, 8; attention factors, 8; marking/not marking manuscript, 8; climax, 7; quality/resonance, 7; symbolism/allegory, 6; dialect (in poem), 6; punctuation, 6; posture, 6; movement (whole body as opposed to gesture), 6; audience's visualization of poem(s), 6; characterization (physical), 5; empathy, 5; memorization, 5; critic role, 5; choice of material, 4; forensics as learning experience, 4; biographical study of author, 3; stanzas/parts, 3; line run-ons, 3; rhythm, 3; vocal difference between introduction/transitions and poetry, 3; audience analysis, 3; type of poetry, 2; sound devices, 2; rhyme, 2; parts of speech, 2; emotion-laden words, 2; physical energy, 2; comparison, 1; dif-

ference between acting and interpretation, 1; personal appearance, 1; gender of reader, 1; cutting/editing poetry, 1; and attitude toward competition, 1.

Stressed Topics

Earlier in this paper the author explained that the sixty-eight topics were divided into five focus areas. The areas with the largest number of topics were Focus on Literary Analysis with twenty-seven and Focus on Delivery with twenty-five. Inasmuch as there is only a two-topic difference between the two areas, numerical comparisons can be made without undue concern over disproportion. Examination of the coaching transcripts revealed that on the primary topic level six of the nine topics came from Focus on Literary Analysis and only two from Focus on Delivery. On the secondary topic level, however, seven of the fifteen came from Focus on Delivery and five from Focus on Literary Analysis. The two focus areas were balanced on the tertiary topic level with fifteen from each.

Discussion of Results

It is obvious that the eight coaching dyads as a whole dealt with the topics considered by oral interpretation experts as important in the study of poetry for performance. Only four of the sixty-eight topics were omitted, and plausible explanations can be made for each omission. Repetition was not a concern in the poetry selections; muscle tone/tension is a topic that is usually linked with the notion of suggestion as opposed to acting, and that concern was virtually ignored by the coaches;

and audience context and the functioning of tournaments are matters most pertinent to first-time competitors, and of the eight novices only one student fell in that category.

Not only did the dyads treat most of the oral interpretation topics but they gave supremacy on the primary topic level to literary analysis. Only on the secondary topic level did delivery become a greater concern. Thus it appears that the dyads as a whole reaffirmed the prevailing notion among oral interpretation scholars that literary analysis is vital to unlocking the meaning of a selection and that delivery grows from this study.¹⁵

Although this paper examines only a portion of the data generated by the eight coaching dyads, it provides evidence that these coaches dealt with the crucial oral interpretation topics. The study casts doubt on the validity of the accusations that forensic contests are not concerned about bringing together the literature and the performer and that coaches lack knowledge of oral interpretation. Had this research shown that the coaches were deficient in these respects, however, then the impetus for reform would have been provided. Either way forensic research serves a vital function for the activity that must begin to defend itself cogently and at the same time to review itself critically.

NOTES

¹For a look at what some forensic educators perceive as problems, see Hal H. Holloway, et al., "Report on the Action Caucus on Oral Interpretation in Forensic Competition," National Forensic Journal 1 (Spring 1983): 43-58.

²Jerry Mathis, chairperson, Worksheet of Task Force III of the Pre-SCA 1983 Convention Conference on "Interpretation: Issues for the '80s," Sauk Valley College, Dixon, Illinois.

³Ibid., p. 5.

⁴Ibid., p. 13.

⁵This statement is based upon a review from 1950 on of all the national and regional speech communication journals, those of Pi Kappa Delta, Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha, and the American Forensic Association, the new journal Literature in Performance, as well as computer searches of ERIC and the dissertation data base.

⁶Carolyn Keefe, "The Process of Coaching for Intercollegiate Forensic Competition in Oral Interpretation of Poetry" (Ed.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1983).

⁷One coach came from Oregon but coached in Pennsylvania, one from California, two from Missouri, one from Florida, and three from Pennsylvania, one of whom coached in New York.

⁸A senior coach was defined as a person who has had at least five years postcollege experience as a forensic coach and is a member of the faculty at a college or university or has been hired as an adjunct to direct the forensic program at a college or university. A graduate student coach was defined as an individual who has had less than five years postcollege experience as a forensic coach and is enrolled in a graduate program.

⁹A consistent program was defined as one that appears for at least the previous five years among the winners in Inter-collegiate Speech Tournament Results.

¹⁰An undergraduate student in his or her first year of inter-collegiate forensic competition was considered as a novice.

¹¹ Each coach was instructed to work with his or her novice until that student in the opinion of the coach was prepared to enter competition with the particular program. The students, however, were not required to use the material, although at least one student did perform it.

¹² The term covered has a flexible meaning in the study. In some cases a topic is dealt with at considerable length, yet in other instances only mention is made. Neither the length nor the frequency of treatment was studied.

¹³ Wallace A. Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979); Elbert R. Bowen, Otis J. Aggertt, and William E. Rickert, Communicative Reading, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978); and Charlotte I. Lee and Timothy Gura, Oral Interpretation, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982).

¹⁴ Don F. Faules, Richard D. Rieke, and Jack Rhodes, Directing Forensics, 2nd ed. (Denver: Morton Publishing Company, 1978) and Donald W. Klopff, Coaching & Directing Forensics (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1982).

¹⁵ See, for example, Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, pp. 5-6.